

Experiences in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

March 1, 2006

Al Janadriah 21st Festival for Heritage and Culture

Asalaam Alakum. I would like to say that I feel deeply honored to be asked to speak to you ladies today and I would like to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the women's section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Al Janadriah organizational committee, and to all others who have helped organize this wonderful festival and forum.

Like the people in Saudi Arabia, Americans greatly value their culture, and value the celebration of our historic events. On behalf of the Ambassador, myself, and the American people, we wish the Saudi people great success of the celebration of Al Janadriah the 21st Festival for Heritage and Culture.

Ambassador and I are not career public servants. He has spent over 30 years in the oil business in Texas and I have spent the same time in the practice of Anesthesiology. When my husband told me the President asked us to come to this very important country of Saudi Arabia, I was speechless. Besides being involved in my practice, I had just delivered the final check to our home builder for architectural plans which had taken over a year and one half to complete. Well, the end of that story you see today, and I am proud to say that we have now lived in Saudi Arabia for almost two years.

Before coming to Riyadh, I had many exciting thoughts of what Saudi Arabia would be like, what the people would be like, but I never imagined how this country and its people would exceed my expectations and in particular, the women of this country. In my experiences, the Saudi women whom I have met have been: warm, welcoming. Generous, Kind. Fair minded, knowledgeable. Optimistic, Directed, and appear to be driven in their goals for all women in the Kingdom. I found a sisterhood of women, anxious to make me feel at home and welcome me to their culture.

Saudi Arabia has a culture that is rich in history. It was amazing to me to come to a part of the world I have only read about and to have this opportunity will be a memory that I will always cherish.

Western people have a thirst and curiosity to know more about your country and people. This past fall, I spoke in Austin, Texas, at the Annual Texas Women's Conference. The conference was started by Laura Bush when President Bush was then the Governor of Texas. The original conference was designed to network and

to talk about women's issues. The first year 500 women attended. This year, Governor Rich Perry and his wife, Anita, welcomed over 7000 women from several countries and many states. I think that this proves #1: that there is a need for women to have such a venue and #2: it proves that if you ask a woman to do a job, it is done with grace, style, and it will exceed everyone's expectations.

At the Texas meeting, I spoke about "what it was like to be the U.S. Ambassador's wife to Saudi Arabia". What I actually talked about was you. The audience didn't want to hear how many parties we had at the Embassy or what distinguished guests had visited our home, and how you do what you do as an Ambassador's spouse, they wanted to know about the people of Saudi Arabia. I told the audience that I have met many accomplished women in the Kingdom and the following are just a few of the ladies I have met here:

The first Saudi female pilot, the first woman to own her own business in the country, the first female physician to be named head of a medical laboratory, the first women who ran for chamber of commerce seats, women who has, because of their passion for education started colleges and universities, the first woman physician to be named as a professor at Harvard, the first female poet to publish her works in English as well as travel and speak on Saudi culture around the world, a group of women volunteers who have organized the first Saudi branch of the American Foreign Service Organization Student Exchange Program, the first class of high school students who are currently studying in high schools across America (two of whom are young ladies), I have visited the first female medical school. I met an outstanding educator who do to her father's foresight in the importance of a woman's education, made sure that his daughter was afforded an education abroad, which opened the door of opportunity for her, and she came home and gave back the gift of becoming a leader of women in education in the Kingdom.

Two days ago, during the opening ceremony, I heard a woman speak about the women's responsibilities to their King, and Kingdom, and to family. One woman said "Our country will witness the work of the women", and I realized that this could also be a historic time for ALL women east and west if we seize the moment. To take the opportunity to communicate with each other, sharing our beliefs, values, and cultures. Having said this, the question came to mind, since far more Saudi women have traveled to America, than American women have been able to travel here, why not harness the exponential capabilities of the internet to share cross cultural exchanges?

In this computer driven age, we are provided with all kinds of opportunities to interact with each other. My curiosity was peaked by that thought, so I turned on my computer and went on Google to find out if there was a Saudi women's web page. Does anyone here know if there is one? I did not find one. My mind was racing and I thought that since many American and western women have lots of questions about women's lives in Saudi Arabia, and since it is difficult at this time

for many American and western women to come to the Kingdom, why not use the internet in a professional and formal way to tell the proper “Saudi women’s story”?

As mentioned before, when we go home, we talk to many people and answer questions about Saudi Arabia, and since a lot of Saudi people travel to the USA, I am sure you also reach out to people in America, but the number of people we speak to are small in comparison to the numbers that you would come in to contact with on the internet.

At the opening ceremony, women were also celebrating the great legacy of Saudi women in the Kingdom, and I would suggest to you that you would benefit women all over the world, by sharing that legacy!

How? Video conferencing for women? This is an avenue which has worked successfully in the medical field and universities. What about video conferencing addressing women’s issues? Not long ago, Ambassador Karen Hughes had the opportunity to visit Dar Al Hekma College in Jeddah. It was a great day with a lot of dialogue exchanged and, several months later, she set up a “video conference” between Washington and Dar Al Hekma and this time there was the opportunity for girls at Dar Al Hekma to exchange ideas with college girls in America.

His Royal Highness King Abdullah has established a “King Abdul Aziz National Dialogue Center”. It is a wonderful organization which I have had the opportunity to visit on several occasions. Would it be a good idea to establish an “International Women’s Dialogue Center”, networking with women around the world to share experiences, ideas, and culture?

Now, why would you want to do this? I can give you an example. We have seen that the world both in the East and West is influenced by the media and often how people in Saudi Arabia and America alike, are perceived by others is by what the people learn in print or on the TV. Often TV and print sources are responsible in the reporting of the news, but sometimes there are misperceptions. For instance, most American women do NOT look or act like the “Baywatch” girls on TV, nor do they act like Britney Spears or Madonna., but sometimes we are portrayed that way and some people may believe it. Oprah Winfrey produced a show that I did not see, but heard many Saudi women talk about. The program did NOT represent your country well, and I feel strongly that if Oprah had known more about the real culture of Saudi Arabia, she would have been able to produce a much different program about this country and customs.

In closing, I will leave these ideas with you to ponder as you think about the next steps of the future for women in the Kingdom and I will also ask you the question, “what kind of relationship with women in the West and in America would YOU like to see happen? (Remembering that this is a window of opportunity for us all).

Sometime, probably next year or so, Ambassador and I will be leaving to return to America, but when we do, we will treasure the time we have spent in the Kingdom getting to know you. One day in America, I will be looking at a sunrise in the eastern sky, and at that moment I will remember about each beautiful sunset I watched in the Kingdom, feeling the evening breeze on my cheek, and I will close my eyes and from memory will hear the quiet song of the call to prayer as it echoes down the waddi, and I will think of you. And we will carry you in our hearts!

Shoukran Jazalin.,

**Mrs. Anita Oberwetter
Wife of Ambassador James C. Oberwetter,
U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**